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JEAN
VANIER

BECOMING
HUMAN

Jean Vanier



Becoming
Human



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Jean Vanier

Jean Vanier is the son of former governor general of Canada George Vanier, and founder of L'Arche, an international network of communities for people with developmental disabilities.

In 1964, after years of studying and teaching philosophy and theology, Vanier bought a house in Trosly-Breuil, France, and invited two men with developmental disabilities to live with him. He named the home L'Arche, after Noah's ark — both a place of refuge and of new beginnings.

L'Arche is now a network of more than one hundred communities in thirty countries, inhabited by people with disabilities and their caregivers. Their goal is to achieve a sense of community and dignity not possible within an institution.

He is also co-founder, with Marie-Hélène Mathieu, of Faith and Light, which brings together people with disabilities, their parents and friends, for regular times of meeting. There are now 1,300 Faith and Light communities in seventy-five countries.

Vanier has written many books, including *Finding Peace, Made for Happiness, Encountering the Other*, and *Befriending the Stranger*.

This One



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I

LONELINESS

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT the liberation of the human heart from the tentacles of chaos and loneliness, and from those fears that provoke us to exclude and reject others. It is a liberation that opens us up and leads us to the discovery of our common humanity. I want to show that this discovery is a journey from loneliness to a love that transforms, a love that grows in and through belonging, a belonging that can include as well as exclude. The discovery of our common humanity liberates us from self-centred compulsions and inner hurts; it is the discovery that ultimately finds its fulfillment in forgiveness and in loving those who are our enemies. It is the process of truly becoming human.

This book is not essentially about the formation and organization of society; it is not essentially political in scope. But since society is made up of individuals, as we open up to others and allow ourselves to be concerned with their condition, then the society in which we live must also change and become more open. We will begin

to work together for the common good. On the other hand, if we commit ourselves to the making of a society in which we are concerned only with our own rights, then that society must become more and more closed in on itself. Where we do not feel any responsibility towards others, there is no reason for us to work harmoniously towards the common good.

Over the last thirty-four years, my experience has been primarily with men and women who have intellectual disabilities. In August 1964, I founded l'Arche: a network of small homes and communities where we live together, men and women with intellectual disabilities and those who feel called to share their lives with them. Today, there are over one hundred l'Arche communities in the world. Living in l'Arche, I have discovered a lot about loneliness, belonging, and the inner pain that springs from a sense of rejection. Community life with men and women who have intellectual disabilities has taught me a great deal about what it means to be human. To some, it may sound strange for me to say that it is the weak, and those who have been excluded from society, who have been my teachers. I hope that I can reveal a bit of what I have learned — and am still learning — about being human, and about helping others to discover our common humanity.

It was only in l'Arche that I really discovered what loneliness is. There were probably many times before l'Arche when I had felt lonely but until then I had not seen loneliness as a painful reality, maybe because I had succeeded in keeping myself busy by doing things. Perhaps I had never named it or needed to give it a name.

When I started welcoming those with intellectual disabilities into l'Arche, men and women from institutions, psychiatric hospitals, dysfunctional families, I began to realize how lonely they were. I discovered the terrible feeling of chaos that comes from extreme loneliness.

A sense of loneliness can be covered up by the things we do as we seek recognition and success. This is surely what I did as a young adult. It is what we all do. We all have this drive to do things that will be seen by others as valuable, things that make us feel good about ourselves and give us a sense of being alive. We only become aware of loneliness at times when we cannot perform or when imagination seems to fail us.

Loneliness can appear as a faint dis-ease, an inner dissatisfaction, a restlessness in the heart.

Loneliness comes at any time. It comes in times of sickness or when friends are absent; it comes during sleepless nights when the heart is heavy, during times of failure at work or in relationships; it comes when we lose trust in ourselves and in others. In old age, loneliness can rise up and threaten to overwhelm us. At such times, life can lose its meaning. Loneliness can feel like death.

When people are physically well, performing creatively, successful in their lives, loneliness seems absent. But I believe that loneliness is something essential to human nature; it can only be covered over, it can never actually go away. Loneliness is part of being human, because there is nothing in existence that can completely fulfill the needs of the human heart.

Loneliness in one form is, in fact, essential to our

humanity. Loneliness can become a source of creative energy, the energy that drives us down new paths to create new things or to seek more truth and justice in the world. Artists, poets, mystics, prophets, those who do not seem to fit into the world or the ways of society, are frequently lonely. They feel themselves to be different, dissatisfied with the status quo and with mediocrity; dissatisfied with our competitive world where so much energy goes into ephemeral things. Frequently, it is the lonely man or woman who revolts against injustice and seeks new ways. It is as if a fire is burning within them, a fire fuelled by loneliness.

Loneliness is the fundamental force that urges mystics to a deeper union with God. For such people, loneliness has become intolerable but, instead of slipping into apathy or anger, they use the energy of loneliness to seek God. It pushes them towards the absolute. An experience of God quenches this thirst for the absolute but at the same time, paradoxically, whets it, because this is an experience that can never be total; by necessity, the knowledge of God is always partial. So loneliness opens up mystics to a desire to love each and every human being as God loves them.

Loneliness, then, can be a force for good. More frequently, however, loneliness shows other, less positive faces. It can be a source of apathy and depression, and even of a desire to die. It can push us into escapes and addictions in the need to forget our inner pain and emptiness. This apathy is how loneliness most often shows itself in the elderly and in those with disabilities.

It is the loneliness we find in those who fall into depression, who have lost the sense of meaning in their lives, who are asking the question born of despair: What is left?

I once visited a psychiatric hospital that was a kind of warehouse of human misery. Hundreds of children with severe disabilities were lying, neglected, on their cots. There was a deadly silence. Not one of them was crying. When they realize that nobody cares, that nobody will answer them, children no longer cry. It takes too much energy. We cry out only when there is hope that someone may hear us.

Such loneliness is born of the most complete and utter depression, from the bottom of the deepest pit in which the human soul can find itself. The loneliness that engenders depression manifests itself as chaos. There is confusion, and coming out of this confusion there can be a desire for self-destruction, for death. So, loneliness can become agony, a scream of pain. There is no light, no consolation, no touch of peace and of the joy life brings. Such loneliness reveals the true meaning of chaos.

Life no longer flows in recognizable patterns. For the person engulfed in this form of loneliness there is only emptiness, anguish, and inner agitation; there are no yearnings, no desires to be fulfilled, no desire to live. Such a person feels completely cut off from everyone and everything. It is a life turned in upon itself. All order is gone and those in this chaos are unable to relate or listen to others. Their lives seem to have no meaning. They live in complete confusion, closed up in themselves.

In Eric and Pierre, there were chaos and disorder. Yet in the midst of the chaos there was a way out. Are not all our lives a movement from order to disorder, which in turn evolves into a new order?

Order and Disorder

The passage of life itself suggests a constantly recurring pattern of movement from order to chaos, from chaos to order, again and again.

Birth, adolescence, and old age are all passages that are filled with anguish. Finally there is the ultimate corruption and disorder that death brings. Throughout our lives there is the disorder created by sickness, accidents, loss of work, loss of friends — all the crises that destroy our agendas, security, and carefully laid plans. Such disorder demands a gradual re-ordering of our lives and the period of transition such a crisis represents is not an easy one to live through. It is a time of loss, when we have yet to receive something new. It is a time of grief.

In human beings, there is a constant tension between order and disorder, connectedness and loneliness, evolution and revolution, security and insecurity. Our universe is constantly evolving: the old order gives way to a new order and this in its turn crumbles when the next order appears. It is no different in our lives in the movement from birth to death.

Change of one sort or another is the essence of life, so there will always be the loneliness and insecurity that come with change. When we refuse to accept that loneliness and insecurity are part of life, when we refuse to

accept that they are the price of change, we close the door on many possibilities for ourselves; our lives become lessened, we are less than fully human. If we try to prevent, or ignore, the movement of life, we run the risk of falling into the inevitable depression that must accompany an impossible goal. Life evolves; change is constant. When we try to prevent the forward movement of life, we may succeed for a while but, inevitably, there is an explosion; the groundswell of life's constant movement, constant change, is too great to resist.

And so empires of ideas, as well as empires of wealth and power, come and go. To live well is to observe in today's apparent order the tiny anomalies that are the seeds of change, the harbingers of the order of tomorrow. This means living in a state of a certain insecurity, in anguish and loneliness, which, at its best, can push us towards the new. Too much security and the refusal to evolve, to embrace change, leads to a kind of death. Too much insecurity, however, can also mean death. To be human is to create sufficient order so that we can move on into insecurity and seeming disorder. In this way, we discover the new.

Those who have the eyes to see this new order, as it arises, will often be considered too revolutionary, too modern, too liberal. Dictators everywhere have clamped down on movements for liberation; those who lead are always so certain that anarchy will arise if they do not govern with a firm hand. In reality, leaders are frightened of sharing or losing power. They too are frightened of change. They want to control everything. Those who see

the coming new order will frequently be alone, persecuted.

But how do we learn to read the signs of evolution and to see where it is going? We can only help the new to evolve if we have certain clear principles. Here are five principles that have helped me.

First: all humans are sacred, whatever their culture, race, or religion, whatever their capacities or incapacities, and whatever their weaknesses or strengths may be. Each of us has an instrument to bring to the vast orchestra of humanity, and each of us needs help to become all that we might be.

Second: our world and our individual lives are in the process of evolving. Evolution is a part of life but it is not always easy to determine the good and the bad in something that is evolving. How to maintain the old and prepare the way for the new? It is not a question of rejecting the past but of letting the past flow into the present and letting this process guide us as to how to live in the future. It is a question of loving all the essential values of the past and reflecting on how they are to be lived in the new. These values include openness, love, wholeness, unity, peace, the human potential for healing and redemption, and, most important, the necessity of forgiveness. So, everything that permits and encourages the flow of life and growth is necessary.

Third: maturity comes through working with others, through dialogue, and through a sense of belonging and a searching together. In order to evolve towards greater maturity and wholeness, we humans need a certain security; only when we have attained this can we advance in insecurity with others towards the new.

Fourth: human beings need to be encouraged to make choices, and to become responsible for their own lives and for the lives of others. We need to be encouraged to evolve in order to become mature, and to break out of the shell of self-centredness and out of our defence mechanisms, which are as oppressive to others as they are to ourselves. In other words, we humans need to be rooted in good earth in order to produce good fruit. But for this we need to freely risk life in order to give of ourselves.

Fifth: in order to make such choices, we need to reflect and to seek truth and meaning. Reality is the first principle of truth. To be human means to remain connected to our humanness and to reality. It means to abandon the loneliness of being closed up in illusions, dreams, and ideologies, frightened of reality, and to choose to move towards connectedness. To be human is to accept ourselves just as we are, with our own history, and to accept others as they are. To be human means to accept history as it is and to work, without fear, towards greater openness, greater understanding, and a greater love of others. To be human is not to be crushed by reality, or to be angry about it or to try to hammer it into what we think it is or should be, but to commit ourselves as individuals, and as a species, to an evolution that will be for the good of all.

Each one of us needs to work at searching for truth, not be afraid of it. We need to strive to live in truth, because the truth sets us free, even if it means living in loneliness and anguish at certain moments. Perhaps this search for truth is a process of letting ourselves be enfolded in truth rather than possessing truth, as if it were an object that

we could possess, that we could use against others.

The truth will set us free only if we let it penetrate our hearts and rend the veil that separates head from heart. It is important not only to join the head and the heart, but to love truth, also, and to let it inspire our lives, our attitudes, and our way of living. The truth of religion and morality shows itself when they liberate us and give us a deep respect and compassion for others.

This process of searching for truth demands an openness; it demands an evolution of thought, for individuals and entire societies, as the whole world changes and we discover new intimations of what *is*. There are unchanging principles, such as the call to be people of love and not of hate, which govern our lives. We need to integrate our experiences into these principles and let these principles enlighten our experience.

Such an evolution in thought can mean searching and groping in the dark, sometimes in anguish, thinking through old ideas, formulating them in new words and new ways. Philosophy, anthropology, theology, and those sciences that tell us what it means to be human can be dangerous if they become ideologies that dictate reality; instead, they need to be understood as the means by which we humbly listen to and marvel at reality.

We must not try to return to the past, but instead launch out into the future — to understand each other and what it means to be human, to understand what is happening in the world — in order to become more fully human and to work for peace and unity. It is only as we begin to integrate such a sense of reality more fully into our being,

with God. We must find a way to balance our two opposing impulses.

The Weakness of a Child

Where do these competing drives, the need to be fully oneself and the need for community, come from?

We were all conceived and born in littleness and weakness. We could do nothing by ourselves. We depended totally on our parents for food and for protection; our greatest need was for their enfolding, protective, and stimulating love. Children cannot live and grow humanly without that love. For a human being, love is as vital as food.

When children are loved, they live off trust; their bodies and hearts open up to those who respect and love them, who understand and listen to them. They begin to blossom.

What happens when a child feels unloved, unwanted? There is nothing to compare with the terrible loneliness of a child; fragile and helpless, a lonely child feels fear, anguish, a sense of guilt. And when children are wounded in their hearts, they learn to protect themselves by hiding behind barriers.

Lonely children feel no commonality with adults. They have lost trust in them and in themselves, they are confused and feel misunderstood. Lonely children cannot name the pain. Only self-accusation remains.

However, life wants to live. If some children fall into depression and want to die, others seem to survive despite adverse conditions such as sickness, squalor, abuse, violence, and abandonment; life can be tenacious and stubborn. Instinctively, all children learn to hide their

terrible feelings behind inner walls, the shadowy areas of their being. All the disorder and darkness of their lives can be buried there. They then throw themselves into their lives, into the search for approbation, into self-fulfillment, into dreams and illusions.

Hurts and pain can transform into the energy that pushes children forward. Such children can then become individuals protected by the barriers they had to build around their vulnerable, wounded hearts. Children who are less wounded will have fewer barriers. They will find it easier to live in the world and to work with others; they will not be as closed in on themselves.

The lonely child is unable to connect with others. There is a lonely child in each of us, hidden behind the walls we created in order to survive. I am speaking, of course, of only one aspect of loneliness, the loneliness that can destroy some part of us, not the loneliness that creates. How might we begin to find a way to overcome the terrible legacy that destructive loneliness leaves us? I can only speak from my own experience, so let me tell you about Claudia.

Love Transforms Chaos

In 1975, we welcomed Claudia into our l'Arche community in Suyapa, a slum area of Tegucigalpa, Honduras. She was seven years old and had spent practically her whole life in a dismal, overcrowded asylum. Claudia was blind, fearful of relationships, filled with inner pain and anguish. Technically speaking she was autistic.

Her anguish seemed to increase terribly when she

arrived in the community, probably because in leaving the asylum, she lost her reference points, as well as the structured existence that had given her a certain security. Everything and everyone frightened her; she screamed day and night and smeared excrement on the walls. She seemed totally mad; overwhelmed by insecurity, her personality appeared to be disintegrating.

Claudia lived a horrible form of madness which should not be idealized or seen as a gateway to another world. In l'Arche, we have learned from our own experience of healing, as well as through the help of psychiatrists and psychologists, that chaos, or "madness," has meaning; it comes from somewhere, it is comprehensible. Madness is an immense cry, a sickness. It is a way of escaping when the stress of being in a world of pain is too great. Madness is an escape from anguish. But there is an order in the disorder that can permit healing, if only it can be found.

Twenty years after she first arrived at Suyapa, I visited the community and met Claudia again; I found her quite well. She was by then a twenty-eight-year-old woman, still blind and autistic but at peace and able to do many things in the community. She still liked being alone but she was clearly not a lonely person. She would often sing to herself and there was a constant smile on her face.

She did get angry at times, when she felt she was not being respected or was put in a situation that provoked feelings of insecurity. One day, I was sitting opposite to her at lunch and said, "Claudia, can I ask you a question?" She replied, "Si, Juan." "Claudia, why are you so happy?" Her answer was simple and direct: "Dios." God. I asked

the community leader, Nadine, what the answer meant. Nadine said, "That is Claudia's secret."

It was loneliness and insecurity that had brought Claudia to the chaos of madness. It was community, love, and friendship that finally brought her inner peace. This movement from chaos to inner peace, from self-hate to self-trust, began when Claudia realized that she was loved.

There are, for me, seven aspects of love that seem necessary for the transformation of the heart in those who are profoundly lonely. They are: to reveal, to understand, to communicate, to celebrate, to empower, to be in communion with another, and, finally, to forgive.

TO REVEAL

The first aspect of love, the key aspect, is revelation. Just as a mother and father reveal to their children that they have value and beauty, so, too, did the therapist and the others who lived with Claudia reveal to Claudia her value and beauty. To reveal someone's beauty is to reveal their value by giving them time, attention, and tenderness. To love is not just to do something for them but to reveal to them their own uniqueness, to tell them that they are special and worthy of attention. We can express this revelation through our open and gentle presence, in the way we look at and listen to a person, the way we speak to and care for someone. Gestures can be filled with a respect that reveals to someone their worth, even if that worth is hidden under anger, hatred, or madness.

This revelation of value, the revelation that heals, takes time. In the case of Claudia, seven childhood years of pain

in an asylum, seven years of loneliness, lack of love, and feelings of worthlessness had taken their toll. Claudia had developed survival tactics and habits founded upon her belief in her own unworthiness. Her madness and screaming were reasonable responses to a world in which nobody wanted her. It took time for the transformation, from a hatred of herself to a trust in herself, to take place.

It is easy to trust in the beauty of a little child, but how to trust in the hidden beauty of Claudia when she appeared so "mad"? That is the fundamental question; how to trust that she has a heart and that she can, little by little, receive love, be transformed by love, and then give love.

The belief in the inner beauty of each and every human being is at the heart of *l'Arche*, at the heart of all true education and at the heart of being human. As soon as we start selecting and judging people instead of welcoming them as they are — with their sometimes hidden beauty, as well as their more frequently visible weaknesses — we are reducing life, not fostering it. When we reveal to people our belief in them, their hidden beauty rises to the surface where it may be more clearly seen by all.

TO UNDERSTAND

To love also means to understand and this is the second aspect of love. Claudia needed to be understood. If no one understood her how could they help her to find inner peace and growth? Her screams were not only a sign of her inner brokenness, darkness, and anguish but also a cry for help. Difficult as it is for us to accept and come to terms with this idea, I believe that every act of violence is also a

is a question of moving from theories we have learned to listening to the reality that is in and around us. Truth flows from the earth. This is not to deny the truth that flows from teachers, from books, from tradition, from our ancestors, and from religious faith. But the two must come together. Truth from the sky must be confirmed and strengthened by truth from the earth. We must learn to listen and then to communicate.

TO CELEBRATE

The fourth aspect of love is celebration. It is not enough to reveal to people their value, to understand and care for them. To love people is also to celebrate them. So often the Claudias of the world are seen only as problems needing to be attended to by professionals. The Claudias also need laughter and play, they need people who will celebrate life with them and manifest their joy of being with them. It was this joy and the gentle presence of Nadine and the others in Suyapa that gradually weakened Claudia's great walls of defence. Little by little, she began to trust that she was not bad, but capable of loving and being loved.

So many people with disabilities are seen by their parents and families only as a tragedy. They are surrounded by sad faces, sometimes full of pity, sometimes tears. But every child, every person, needs to know that they are a source of joy; every child, every person, needs to be celebrated. Only when all of our weaknesses are accepted as part of our humanity can our negative, broken self-images be transformed.

TO EMPOWER

The fifth aspect of love is empowerment. It is not just a question of doing things for others but of helping them to do things for themselves, helping them to discover the meaning of their lives. To love means to empower. Claudia had to learn gradually that she was responsible for her own body, for her own life, that she had authority over her actions, and that she could make choices, however small. But with this sense of responsibility for herself also came the necessity of learning to respect others. Empowerment meant that Claudia had to learn how to observe the structures of the community and make efforts to respect and love others.

Many assistants come to our l'Arche communities to help and to live with men and women who have intellectual disabilities. An assistant's role is like that of a midwife: to bring forth and help foster life, to let it develop and grow according to its own natural rhythm. Assistants in l'Arche are not there to make people with disabilities somehow "normal," but to help them to grow towards maturity. For each person in l'Arche this growth towards maturity will be different. Nadine's role, as well as the role of the other assistant, was not to control, possess, or program Claudia, but to help her blossom forth into freedom, to encourage her to grow and to accept herself as she is. Claudia's life is her own secret.

Claudia could only begin to grow as she became more conscious of the mutual belonging and mutual dependence that is at the heart of the Suyapa community, itself a mirror of the larger world. And so it was that Claudia

gradually began to discover that while Nadine was calling forth new life in her, Claudia was also calling forth new life in Nadine.

We have discovered how love flows into communion, the sixth aspect of love.

TO BE IN COMMUNION

Communion is mutual trust, mutual belonging; it is the to-and-fro movement of love between two people where each one gives and each one receives. Communion is not a fixed state, it is an ever-growing and deepening reality that can turn sour if one person tries to possess the other, thus preventing growth. Communion is mutual vulnerability and openness one to the other. It is liberation for both, indeed, where both are allowed to be themselves, where both are called to grow in greater freedom and openness to others and to the universe.

Trust is a beautiful form of love. When we are generous, we give money, time, knowledge. In trust, we give ourselves. But we can only give of ourselves if we trust that we will be well-received by someone. At what moment is trust born? There was a secret moment, known only to Claudia, when she recognized that she was loved.

With that realization, Claudia entered into a relationship of belonging. The opening of Claudia's heart brought about a new opening in Nadine's heart, bringing her out of her own loneliness. That moment was the birth of communion between them.

Communion is at the heart of the mystery of our humanity. It means accepting the presence of another inside

BECOMING HUMAN

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ACCLAIMED AS A MAN "who inspires the world" (*Maclean's*) and a "nation builder" (*Globe and Mail*), Jean Vanier has made a difference in the lives of countless people. In this provocative book, Vanier shares his profoundly human vision for creating a common good that radically changes our communities, our relationships, and ourselves. He proposes that by opening ourselves to outsiders, those we perceive as weak, different, or inferior, we can achieve true personal and societal freedom. *Becoming Human* is not only a book full of extraordinary ideas, but a revolutionary call to action. The 10th anniversary edition includes a new Introduction by the author.

JEAN VANIER is the founder of *L'ARCHET*[™]*, an international network of communities for people with intellectual disabilities. He has written a number of books, including *Finding Peace, Made for Happiness, Encountering the Other*, and *Befriending the Stranger*. He has received numerous distinctions and awards in recognition of his contributions to society, including the Companion of the Order of Canada and the Legion of Honour (France). In 2006 Vanier received the prestigious Beacon Fellowship Prize for his lifelong commitment to the care, well-being, and independence of people with disabilities worldwide.

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